

Writing with Style

Conversations on the Art of Writing

Second Edition

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should be nothing more yet for you than making writing fit a preordained mold, and it is this that makes the real writer's task difficult. He wants to do his best, but he must start from scratch. He must invent his own mold, and he must do it all alone. There is no teacher, no guide, no model to follow. He must learn by trial and error, by experience, by trial and error again, and again, and again. He must learn to trust his own judgment, and he must learn to trust his own judgment again, and again, and again. He must learn to trust his own judgment again, and again, and again. He must learn to trust his own judgment again, and again, and again.

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Thinking Well

The indispensable characteristic of a good writer is a style marked by lucidity.

—Ernest Hemingway

And how is clarity to be achieved? Mainly by taking trouble; and by writing to serve people rather than to impress them.

—F.L. Lucas

Each profession, it would seem, has its own style of thought that must be mastered before a person feels at home in it. The law certainly does. So does architecture. And so, too, with engineering, accounting, computer programming, film directing, psychology, carpentry—you name it, they all have a style of thought related to the nature of the profession. It stands to reason that writing would have its own, too. And it does.

What a novice needs more than anything, then, is to plug into the brain of an experienced writer—to understand the assumptions she typically makes, the silent monologue that is occupying her head as she composes, the special effects she is trying to achieve . . . Without that guiding instinct, writing will remain all hit-or-miss—a frustrating repetition of trial and error, over and over again.

A beginning chess player faces many of the same problems. Lacking any kind of "chess sense," as players call it, he sits bewildered at the board, moving first a pawn, then a bishop, then—why not?—his queen, all at random, hoping that something good will come of it but knowing that if it does, it will be a mere piece of luck. He has no idea how seasoned players think at the board. Even sitting across from them, he cannot fathom what they're trying to accomplish with a particular move, what blunders they're trying to avoid, what alternate game strategies they might be considering. He can certainly appreciate the *effects*, but the actual thought process is a mystery.

Unfortunately, the grandmasters have made it far easier for a novice to acquire chess sense than authors have made it for him to acquire its literary equivalent. They've published book after book explaining how to think chess—what opening gambits to consider, what counterattacks work well, what endgame tactics to use. Authors of writing texts, on the other hand, tend to stress mechanics, perhaps assuming that people either know how to think or they don't.

I hope to repair that neglect. My chief aim, both in this chapter and throughout the book, is to help you develop "writer's sense." You'll find it as indispensable as radar to a pilot. I'll begin by explaining how a novice writer typically thinks so that when I move on to explain how the veteran thinks, you'll have a more vivid sense of the contrast.

The Novice

Most of the novice's difficulties start with the simple fact that the paper he writes on is mute. Because it never talks back to him, and because he's concentrating so hard on generating ideas, he readily forgets—unlike the veteran—that another human being will eventually be trying to make sense of what he's saying. The result? *His natural tendency as a writer is to think primarily of himself—hence to write primarily for himself.* Here, in a nutshell, lies the ultimate reason for most bad writing.*

He isn't aware of his egocentrism, of course, but all the symptoms of his root problem are there: he thinks through an idea only until it is

* Paul Burka, a National Magazine Award-winning journalist and executive editor of *Texas Monthly*, told one of my classes, "The hardest thing a writer has to do is curb his self-indulgence."

passably clear to him, since, for his purposes, it needn't be any clearer; he dispenses with transitions because it's enough that *he* knows how his ideas connect; he uses a private system—or no system—of punctuation; he doesn't trouble to define his terms because he understands perfectly well what he means by them; he writes page after page without bothering to vary his sentence structure; he leaves off page numbers and footnotes; he paragraphs only when the mood strikes him; he ends abruptly when he decides he's had enough; he neglects to proofread the final job because the writing is over . . . Given his total self-orientation, it's no wonder that he fails repeatedly as a writer. Actually, he's not writing at all; he's merely communing privately with himself—that is, he's simply putting thoughts down on paper.

I call this “unconscious writing.” The unconscious writer is like a person who turns his chair away from his listener, mumbles at length to the wall, and then heads for home without a backward glance.

Basically, all it takes to begin moving from unconscious writing to genuine writing is a few moments’ reflection on what the writing/reading process ideally involves. Think about it. What it involves is one person earnestly attempting to communicate with another. Implicitly, then, it involves the reader as much as the writer, since *the success of the communication depends solely on how the reader receives it*. Also, since more than one person is involved, and since all of us have feelings, *it has to be as subject to the basic rules of good manners as any other human relationship*. The writer who is fully aware of these implications—the conscious writer—resembles a person who companionably faces her listener and tries her level best to communicate with him, even persuade and charm him in the process, and who eventually bids him the equivalent of a genial farewell.

The big breakthrough for the novice writer, then, will occur at the moment he begins to comprehend the social implications of what he’s doing. Far from writing in a vacuum, he is conversing, in a very real sense, with another human being, just as I am conversing right now with you, even though that person—like you—may be hours, or days, or even years away in time. This breakthrough parallels an infant’s dawning realization that a world exists beyond himself.

Actually, since the novice is as much a self-oriented newcomer to his social world as the infant is to his, we might suspect that the similarity doesn’t end there. And we’re right. Both of them pass through a gradual process of socialization and deepening awareness. The writer, for example, after realizing that a world—a reader—exists out there beyond

himself, slowly comes to develop, first, an awareness of himself from the reader's vantage point (*objectivity*); next, a capacity to put himself imaginatively in the mind of the reader (*empathy*); and finally, an appreciation of the reader's rights and feelings (*courtesy*). You can see that the young writer is essentially retracing, in a new context, the same psychic journey he traveled as a child. Even the net result is comparable. Having passed the last stage of courtesy as a child, he achieved the mark of a truly civilized person: social sensitivity. When he passes the same stage as a writer, he achieves the mark of a truly civilized author: a readable style.

The Veteran

The thinking process of a skilled writer reflects how she conceives the writing situation. Let's start, then, by developing a realistic understanding of what that situation involves.

All writing is communication. But most writing hopes to go further. It hopes to make the reader react in certain ways—with pleased smiles, nods of assent, stabs of pathos, or whatever.

So we can say, generally, that *writing is the art of creating desired effects*.

Now for an essay writer, the chief desired effect is persuasion. Suppose you are that writer. You want your readers to buy two things: your ideas and you, their source. That is, you want them to view your ideas as sound and interesting, and to view you as smart, informed, direct, and companionable. (All of these things, of course, are desired effects.) If you don't persuade them to accept you, it's doubtful that you'll persuade them to buy the ideas you're proffering. We buy from people we like and trust—it's human nature.

The big question, then, is how to win readers? Here are four essentials:

1. Have something to say that's worth their attention.
2. Be sold on its validity and importance yourself so you can pitch it with conviction.
3. Furnish strong arguments that are well supported with concrete proof.
4. Use confident language—vigorous verbs, strong nouns, and assertive phrasing.

While that looks like a pretty full recipe for successful writing, it isn't. Even if we exclude sheer artfulness, one thing is still missing—and almost

always is. The ultimate way we win readers is by courteously *serving* them—that is, satisfying their needs. An experienced writer knows that to serve well is to sell well; equally, to sell well is to serve well. They are complementary activities. The means are inseparable from the ends.

The writer, for all practical purposes, does not exist without the assent of his readers, who have the power to shut him off at whim. This fact of life makes pleasing them absolutely critical. But that's only fair. If we're going to ask them to give us their time and attention, then we're in *their* debt, not the other way around; we must be prepared to repay their kindness with kindness of our own. Beyond pleasing them simply to square debts and keep them reading, though, there's also the practical necessity of pleasing them in order to persuade them. Samuel Butler long ago remarked, "We are not won by arguments that we can analyze, but by tone and temper, by the manner which is the man himself." I don't wholly agree with that, but it's certainly close to the truth. A pleasing manner surely makes one's arguments themselves seem pleasing because it dresses them in an aura of reasonableness.

All of us, I think, grasp these facts of life perfectly well as readers, but most of us manage to forget them as writers. Being unconsciously self-oriented, we think it's enough simply to lay out our ideas. Experience keeps disproving us, though. Readers will always insist on having their needs looked after, as they have every right to, and if we're heedless, they'll say "Enough of you" and toss our piece aside.

How, then, do you serve your reader? First, you must cultivate a psychological sense. That is, you must sensitize yourself to what wins *you* over—how and why *you* respond, and what makes *you* feel well served—and gradually learn to extend that awareness to your reader. This book, incidentally, is as good a place as any to start sensitizing yourself. As you read along, you ought to be asking yourself such questions as these: "Is his style too complex to be readable, or too plain, or is it just right—and why?" "What is his tone, and how does he achieve it? Do I like it or don't I?" "Why does he use a semicolon here instead of a period?" "Do I like this two-sentence paragraph?" "What effect do his contractions have on me?" A writer eager to improve his psychological sense never simply reads; he reads critically. His mind is always alert to the *manner* as well as the message, for only in this way will he learn what works and why it works, plus what doesn't work and why it doesn't. He's like one musician listening to the chords and phrasing of another. What's special he'll imitate and make his own.

Once you acquire the habit of reading attentively, you'll find that your psychological sense will improve sharply, and with it your tactical sense, too. This will have an immediate impact not only on the effectiveness of your writing but on your attitude toward it as well. You'll discover yourself beginning to relish it as a supreme challenge to your powers of salesmanship. At the same time, you'll find yourself becoming increasingly considerate. Your readers' needs, not your own, will dominate your thinking. And it will give you pleasure; you'll quickly learn to enjoy the sense of communion, the fellow-feeling it brings, for, as in a friendship, you'll be in warm, imaginative touch with other human beings.

All of this brings me to the second prime way of serving your readers: schooling yourself to be *other-oriented*. You try to understand your readers. You actively think of them, identify with them, empathize with them. You try to intuit their needs. You train yourself to think always of *their* convenience, not your own. You treat them exactly as you would wish to be treated, with genuine consideration for their feelings. And you keep reminding yourself, over and over, that *good writing is good manners*.

There are five specific ways you can serve your readers' needs. Please add them to the list of four essentials that I gave you a minute ago; and as you read them, note how they apply to conversation as well as to writing:

1. Phrase your thoughts clearly so you're easy to follow.
2. Speak to the point so you don't waste readers' time.
3. Anticipate their reactions (boredom, confusion, fatigue, irritation).
4. Offer them variety and wit to lighten their work.
5. Talk to them in a warm, open manner instead of pontificating to them like a know-it-all.

Although I'll be following up on all these points in later chapters, I'd like to expand here on #1, the need for clarity, and #3, the need to anticipate your readers' responses. This will give me a chance to explain more concretely the assumptions and actual thought processes of a skilled writer.

Phrase Your Thoughts Clearly

A prose style may be eloquent, lyrical, witty, rhythmical, and fresh as Montana air, but if it lacks clarity, few readers will stay with it for long. Just as no one enjoys looking at a view, however spectacular, through a mud-streaked window, no one enjoys listening to a symphony of words reduced to mere noise.

Hemingway was right: clarity *is* the indispensable characteristic of good prose. It's the first thing a reader demands, and perhaps the hardest thing to deliver. Not only must the individual thoughts be clear but, even more challenging, they must follow a logical sequence. Since the average human mind isn't accustomed to thinking systematically, trying to write clear prose is as fatiguing as waterskiing. You're using muscles that normally get little exercise, and they soon let you know it.

But in writing, as in waterskiing, progress does come with practice. And it's greatly accelerated by imitating the techniques and attitudes of experts. Clear writers, for instance, vary widely in native intelligence, but they all share several attitudes:

- They assume that their chief job is to *communicate*. They hope to do more, of course—namely, persuade and charm—but they know that communication must come first, especially if they are ever to achieve these other effects.
- They assume, with a pessimism born of experience, that whatever isn't plainly stated, the reader will invariably misconstrue. They keep in mind that she is, after all, a perfect stranger to their garden of ingenious ideas. In fact, to her, that garden may initially resemble a tangled thicket, if not a tropical rain forest. This being so, their job as writer is to guide her through, step by step, so that the experience will be quick and memorable. This involves alertly anticipating her moments of confusion and periodically giving her an explanation of where she's headed. The writer's Golden Rule is the same as the moralist's: Do unto others. . . .
- They assume that even their profoundest ideas are capable of being expressed clearly. They aren't so vain as to think that their reflections transcend the powers of language—Shakespeare punctures that fantasy—nor so lazy as to ask their reader to double as a clairvoyant. As novelist Somerset Maugham remarked in *The Summing Up*:

I have never had much patience with the writers who claim from the reader an effort to understand their meaning. You have only to go to the great philosophers to see that it is possible to express with lucidity the most subtle reflections. You may find it difficult to understand the thought of Hume, and if you have no philosophical training its implications will doubtless escape you; but no one with any education at all can fail to understand exactly what the meaning of each sentence is.

- They have accepted the grim reality that nine-tenths of all writing is rewriting . . .

- Perhaps most important of all, they are sticklers for continuity. They link their sentences and paragraphs as meticulously as if they might face criminal charges for negligence.

But rather than speak for them, perhaps I should let a few clear writers speak for themselves. Here, first, is the distinguished British historian George M. Trevelyan:

The idea that histories which are delightful to read must be the work of superficial temperaments, and that a crabbed style betokens a deep thinker or conscientious worker, is the reverse of the truth. What is easy to read has been difficult to write. The labor of writing and rewriting, correcting and recorrecting, is the due exacted by every good book from its author. . . . The easily flowing connection of sentence with sentence and paragraph with paragraph has always been won by the sweat of the brow.

And now novelist James A. Michener:

I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read one of my first drafts. But I'm one of the world's greatest rewriters.

And finally E.B. White, perhaps America's most respected 20th-century essayist, whose consistently graceful style entitles him to have the last word:

The main thing I try to do is write as clearly as I can. Because I have the greatest respect for the reader, and if he's going to the trouble of reading what I've written—I'm a slow reader myself and I guess most people are—why, the least I can do is make it as easy as possible for him to find out what I'm trying to say, trying to get at. I rewrite a good deal to make it clear.

Anticipate Your Reader's Responses

The chief difficulty with writing is that it seems a one-way process. You can't see your reader's face, you can't hear her, you can't get any feedback from her whatsoever. The novice writer, as we've seen, is oblivious to this handicap. The skilled writer, though, is supersensitive to it. But he overcomes it by actively *imagining* a reader—in fact, imagining

many different readers—just as an experienced TV newscaster, looking into the camera's unwinking eye, actively imagines a viewer.

The kind of reader (or readers) that a skilled writer imagines will depend, of course, on the occasion, the type of piece he's writing, and other such factors. But whatever the occasion, he'll assume the reader has a zillion more interesting things to do with her time, is reading at a fast clip, and *is just waiting for an excuse to tune out*. The writer's challenge, then, is to avoid giving her that excuse. The supreme challenge is to make her quite forget the other things she wanted to do.

How does the writer meet these challenges? Chiefly by *empathy*. The whole time he's writing, he's constantly switching back and forth from his own mind to hers. Like a skilled chess player, he makes a dozen mental moves for every actual one. Each of them he tests as to the probable response it will elicit. *Anticipation*, he's learned, is the name of the game. If he can anticipate a response, he has a fair chance of controlling it. So every sentence—yes, *every* sentence—receives a battery of challenges:

- “Am I droning here? Is she ready to silence me? Is there any way I can light-en this up?”
- “How can I get her to see—to *feel*—the urgency of this point?”
- “Is the continuity silky here, or is fatigue blinding me to a bump?”
- “Might she welcome an analogy here, or is this abstract idea clear enough on its own?”
- “Am I treating her as if she were an idiot?”
- “Is there any conceivable way this sentence might confuse her?”
- “Have I just used any of these words in previous sentences?”
- “Will this phrase strike her as pretentious? And, honestly, am I using it to im-press her, or is this the only way I can express the thought cleanly?”
- “Will she get the nuance here, or had I better spell it out?”
- “Can she jump on me for verbosity here?”
- “Will she hear a strongly conversational, living voice coming through, or am I beginning to sound like a book?”

He's equally watchful about the way he paragraphs. He remembers all too well encountering whale-like paragraphs that left him sinking under their weight, not to mention those mini-paragraphs that had his eye bounc-ing down the page. Too much or too little in a paragraph, he knows, has the same effect: it wears the reader out. He also watches the continuity between paragraphs. “Is the connection solid?” he asks himself. “Will my reader want an even sturdier bridge between these parts of my argument? Is there any conceivable way she can feel disoriented here?”

And so on, and so on. Writing well is a long exercise in second-guessing and empathizing—even a kind of non-neurotic, self-induced paranoia. It puts a premium on social sensitivity, alertness, and goodwill. It is, in short, a very complicated business. But, like mountain climbing, it's also wonderfully challenging. Rewarding, too. When you've genuinely communicated with another person, when you've persuaded her to accept a new viewpoint, and when the whole learning experience has been fun for her because you *made* it fun for her, that's downright satisfying—hell, it's exhilarating.

Some Concluding Thoughts

1. *Mumbo jumbo* is another word for grunts of the mind. *Mumbo jumbo* is what comes out in first and second drafts when you're writing basically for *yourself*—that is, when you're still trying to fathom what you think about a subject.
2. Once you've finished writing for *yourself* and begin writing for the *reader*, your *mumbo jumbo* will start turning into bona fide prose—i.e., sentences that make sense.
3. If your reader can't get your full meaning in a single reading, however—and a *single reading is all she owes you*—you must face up to the fact that you're afflicted with some residual *mumbo jumbo*.
4. The best remedy? *Shorter words and shorter sentences*.
5. When you finally think you've finished a piece, reread it twice, first through the eyes of the average reader (for unconscious obscurities) and second through the eyes of your worst enemy (for all other lapses). This tends to have a nicely chilling effect on overheated and underthought prose.
6. As a last caution, let the piece stand overnight. Then, in the morning, go at it again—you're bound to have a whole new outlook. Also, do as the professional author does and share it with some candid friends. Tell them, "I'm interested in seeing this thing *improved*, not *approved*"—and mean it. As reinforcement, it might help both you and your friends if you quote them a remark George Bernard Shaw once made to the actress Ellen Terry. Miss Terry had confessed her reluctance to deface the manuscripts of a play he had sent her for criticism. Shaw wrote back to her:

Oh, bother the MSS., mark them as much as you like: what else are they for? Mark everything that strikes you. I may consider a thing 49 times; but if you consider it, it will be considered 50 times; and a line 50 times considered is 2 per cent better than a line 49 times considered. And it is the final 2 per cent that makes the difference between excellence and mediocrity.